

# Oh, what a Circus!

**By Dr. Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Institute of Design and Economic Acceleration (IDEA) and Senior Fellow, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University**

Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson, better known as Boris, arguably demonstrates that as long as you've created an identifiable brand based on personality, there is no limit to ambition. The long-held aphorism that only politicians whose background is free from controversy or taint of immorality would succeed has been turned on its head. If being a saint was the prerequisite to becoming PM, and though the choice would be narrowed down to almost zero, Boris would surely be regarded as the least worthy person to hold this office.

The list of those who warned us of the perils this country would face under a government led by Boris Johnson was a long one. Those critics of Johnson are easy to find, there can be few as excoriating as the right-wing journalist and seminal historian Sir Max Hastings in his June 2019 op-ed in [The Guardian](#).

If you've never read it, Hastings, who was editor of *The Telegraph* whilst Johnson was employed as a journalist can't be accused of pulling punches. He states his view that "Johnson would not recognise truth, whether about his private or political life, if confronted by it in an identity parade", and that "Almost the only people who think Johnson a nice guy are those who do not know him".

Those who argued that Johnson, given the chance of becoming leader/PM, would demonstrate an ability for a role that, even in less turbulent times, is extremely demanding and requires a strength of character and resolve he'd never previously shown, must wonder what they were thinking.

Since he took over as leader and PM, there have been a succession of incidents and crisis under Johnson that, even without the worse health crisis for a century, provide clear evidence that, as his housemaster at Eton, Martin Hammond, so infamously wrote in a

letter to his father Stanley; “I think he honestly believes that it is churlish of us not to regard him as an exception, one who should be free of the network of obligation which binds everyone else.”

A succession of leaked stories, the very public resignation of former Chancellor Sajid Javid, as well as incompetent handling of the impact of the pandemic provides evidence indicating Johnson’s many detractors were right to express concern. Indeed, as many contend, his character makes him unsuitable for a position requiring innate sensibility, confidence in judgement and a steely determination to implement policies that, though unpopular, will be in the country’s collective best interest.

The belief that the PM is someone lacks ideology and is prepared to be guided by ‘the flow of events’ and wants to be loved is borne out the accounts of many who’ve worked with him. Ex-conservative grandee, Lord Michael Heseltine, exclaimed in an interview on ITV show *Good Morning Britain* in September 2018 that Johnson is a politician who waits to see which way the crowd is running, “then dashes in front.” Having left the Tories because of the stance on Brexit Johnson assumed as leader, in campaigning for the LibDem party prior to last December’s general election, he called him “[the most flexible politician of modern times.](#)”

Though Johnson may not relish conflict, he expected compliance by others within his party that he had never been subject to when he was a member of the cabinet. Though not a disciplinarian himself, Johnson used enforcers to do his bidding. The behaviour and attitude of ‘super-forecaster’ and aspirant Nostradamus, Dominic Cummings, is well documented.

The importance senior aide, Lee Cain, however, is less well-known. This became apparent because of the unseemly squabbling amongst staff who work as part of the PM’s closest team at 10 Downing Street leading to the resignation of both Cummings and Cain last week.

As many are now asking, how will Johnson cope with running the country now that Cummings and Cain are no longer around? It is speculated that Johnson is now under the influence of the person closest to him, his partner Carrie Symonds. Dan Sales in the [Daily](#)

[Mail](#) suggests she now possesses “real power” over a PM lacking “any authority”.

There is a talk of a ‘reboot’ of Johnson to allow the ‘Real Boris’ to emerge who, it’s asserted, freed from the malign influence of [Cummings and Cain](#), both ardent Brexiters, will oversee a government achieving greater consensus and able to fulfil the expectations placed in him by voters last December. Other commentators speculate that Johnson may struggle in articulating what he actually believes in and what needs to be achieved.

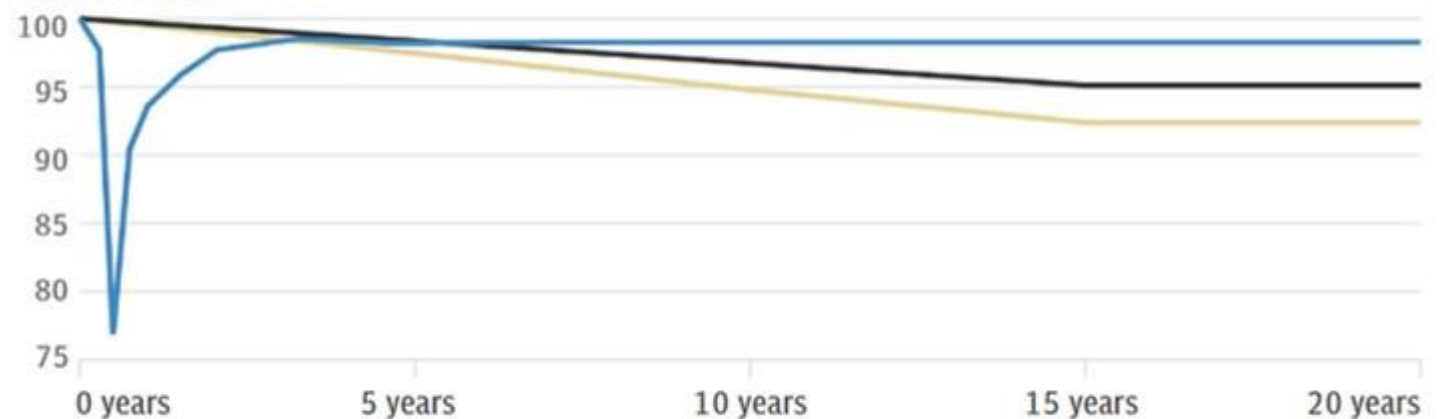
What is certain is that the immediate challenges will become no less daunting for Johnson, not least Covid-19. Perhaps the most daunting immediate challenge faced by Johnson is avoiding no-deal as the outcome of ongoing negotiations between the UK and EU. To her credit, Theresa May desperately tried to ensure this would not happen. Johnson, who ‘flip-flopped’ on whether to support remain or leave even before the referendum, is inconsistent on what he believes the end destination of the talks to be.

## Economic impact

*Forecast shock to UK GDP over 20 years*

— Covid-19 — FTA Brexit — No deal Brexit

Real GDP index

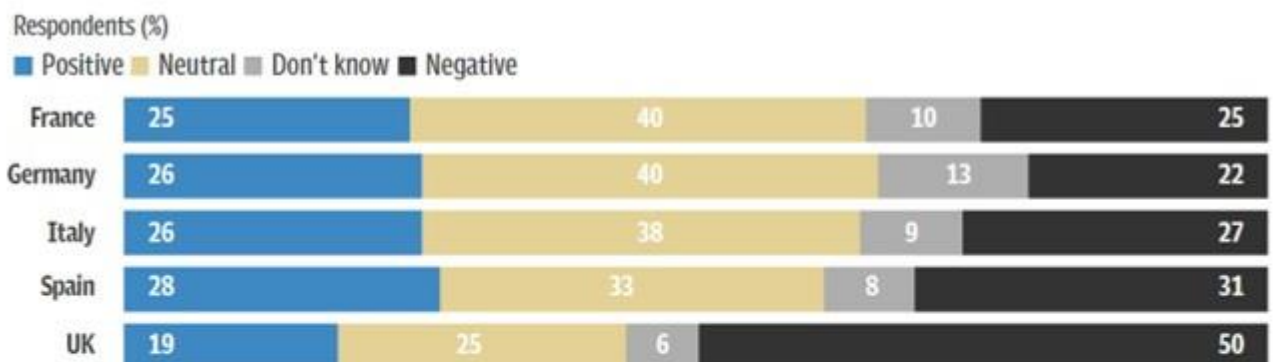


SOURCE: UK IN A CHANGING EUROPE AND LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS MODELLING

Source: *The Telegraph*

Warnings of chaos at ports and the immense problem of completing checks with sufficiently speed to deal with fresh food and plant imports should there be a [‘no-deal’ Brexit](#) will not have gone unnoticed by Johnson and other members of the cabinet.

A YouGov poll of businesses in the UK as well as France, Germany, Italy and Spain indicates little appetite for the imposition of WTO (World Trade Organisation) rules:



Sample of leaders in: France (250), Germany (250), Italy (250), Spain (252), UK (1,108)  
Survey: 23 September to 2 October 2020

SOURCE: YOUNG

Source: *The Telegraph*

Increased tariffs present another concern for many. Despite some expressing concern that it may already be [too late to achieve a trade deal](#), many believe that the ‘mood music’ has shifted.

The election of pro-EU Joe Biden as President of the United States, as supportive of the Good Friday Agreement as it’s possible to be, would suggest a shift in climate. Ireland’s *Taoiseach*, Micheál Martin believes that there is enough scope between UK and EU negotiators to create [“landing zones”](#) allowing a deal provides grounds for optimism.

The antics of Johnson and the ‘circus’ he has created around himself has, since the pandemic, resulted in the worst rate of deaths as well as almost the greatest economic hit in any European country. It didn’t

need to be like this. What the citizens of the UK wanted was a sense of calm leadership being carried out by a PM in control of what is best for their long-term interests. A PM previously enthralled to ‘maverick genius’ [Dominic Cummings](#) and now under the spell of a latter-day ‘[Lady McBeth](#)’ in [Carrie Symonds](#) is not good for our collective interests.

What can be said with worrying certainty is that the next few weeks are, [as far as the future of this country is concerned](#), as fraught with danger as we’ve seen for many decades. A failure of Johnson to achieve a deal with the EU will add to the economic misery that is likely to be endured in coming months and years. Arguments by Brexiteres that free of the EU the UK will thrive remain mere hyperbole; some would say fantasy.

Eva Perón, the subject of the song from which the title of this blog is based, though not a saint, strove to improve the lives of the poor and dispossessed of Argentina. Death from cancer in 1952 at the age of 33 robbed the country of what she believed was urgently needed to make people’s lives better by electing her as Vice President. Posthumously she became “Spiritual Leader of the Nation”.

What, whenever Johnson steps down as PM, will his legacy be?

**Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807) and *English Regions After Brexit: Examining Potential Change through Devolved Power* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8666953099). He has contributed chapters to a number of texts in the last year (in 2020 unless otherwise stated): *Brexit Negotiations after Article 50: Assessing Process, Progress and Impact* (published in 2019 by Emerald Publishing, ISBN: 978-1787697683); *The Wolves in the Forest: Tackling Inequality in the 21st Century* edited by Hindley and Hishman (published in 2019 by Social Liberal Forum); *Boris, Brexit and the Media* edited by Mair, Clark, Fowler, Snoddy and Tait (published by Abramis Academic Publishing, ISBN-13: 978-1845497644); *The Virus and the Media: How British Journalists Covered the Pandemic*, edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8643725824); *The Pandemic, Where Did We Go Wrong?* edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-**

13: 979-8665858326); *BBC, A Winter of Discontent?* edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books ISBN-13: 979-8694863117) and *The Pandemic, Where are We Still Going Wrong?* edited by Mair, (published by Bite-Sized Books ISBN-13: 979-8563726338).